

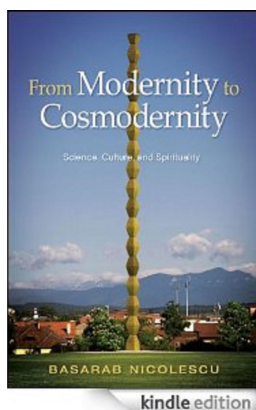
Articles from Integral Leadership Review

4/7 – Basarab Nicolescu. From modernity to cosmopolitanism: Science, culture, and spirituality.

2015-04-02 15:04:13 Sue L. T. McGregor

Basarab Nicolescu. (2014). *From modernity to cosmopolitanism: Science, culture, and spirituality*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press. ISBN 978-1-4384-4963-0 or Kindle version.

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I am very familiar with Basarab Nicolescu's formulation of transdisciplinarity, having been a keen student of his approach for over a decade. I have a deep respect for the brilliance and the quantum nuances of his approach. And I was not disappointed; this is a profound and groundbreaking book. I did take a conceptual detour before I read it, to discover the meaning of one of the words used in the title, *cosmopolitanism*. It is not until the last three pages of the book that he defines this in any detail. In hindsight, I now suspect that he did this on purpose. I just need conceptual clarity, so I stopped to figure it out before I read the book.

Just as we have modernity and postmodernity, we now have cosmopolitanism. Modern means contemporary, up-to-date, and a departure from traditions.

Postmodern means after modernism. It refers to a distrust of anything modern, including its theories and ideologies, and it expresses this distrust by drawing attention to modern conventions. Cosmodernity relates to the *cosmos*, a word that means everything exists everywhere. Indeed, Nicolescu said “*Cosmodernity* means essentially that all entity (existence) in the universe is defined by its relation to all other entities” (2014, p. 212).

As a side note, Nicolescu coined the term *cosmodernity* in 1994, in a book titled *Poetical Theorems*. This book contained 13 chapters and one group of poetical theorems dealt with the aforementioned controversial distinction between modernity and postmodernity. For clarification, he said a poetical theorem is neither a theory nor a poem but is a way to “concentrate in a few pages [concepts, ideas and] theories that would have taken years to be exposed in tens of volumes of scientific and academic discourse” (Dincă, 2011, p. 121). Poetical theorems serve to make everything clear.

Also *before* reading this book, I recommend you head to pp. 212-213, where he references another book on cosmodernism by Christian Moraru (2011). Nicolescu explained that Moraru’s discussion is an “excellent and necessary complement” (p. 212) to his understanding of the construct. Moraru explained that a “powerful *withness*,” “a new geometry of we,” distinguishes cosmodernity from modernity and postmodernity (p. 23, p. 7). Given that *cosmos* means everything exists everywhere, and is in relation to everything else, it makes sense that Moraru described cosmodernity as an ethical project, and “the ethical imperative of cosmodernity is togetherness” (p. 304).

Now... feeling a bit more comfortable with what cosmodernity actually means, I will proceed with my review of Nicolescu’s book. On a pragmatic level, the book is 271 pages in length, organized into 17 chapters. There is an index, notes for each chapter, and a list of references for the whole book. Nicolescu’s *Introduction* is powerful on its own, convincing and compelling. I read it *before* I stopped and figured out what he meant by cosmodernity. With my emergent understanding of this new term, his introduction to the topic it is even more meaningful in hindsight. He basically argued that the world has witnessed an unprecedented growth of knowledge but this is tainted because the growth in knowledge happened due to an accelerating proliferation of disciplines and not due to the unity of knowledge, by which he means connecting knowledge with being (connecting science with humans). Because technoscience triumphed over spirituality and human and social happiness, the world is not better for this growth of knowledge.

He also has issues with modern notion of reality, and claims we lost faith in modernity with the events of September 11, 2001. Modernity promised endless progress, fuelled by technoscience and the belief that we live in a rationale, deterministic, and mechanistic world. Modern science’s penchant for sidelining humanity (the subject) for the sake of objectivity has lead to alienation, fragmentation, and the possible decimation of the planet. He is frustrated. He refers to the triple revolution that spanned the twentieth

century – the quantum revolution, the biological revolution, and the information revolution. He thinks these changes should have changed our view of reality – to a transreality that accommodates complexity, spirituality (humanity), and consciousness. Instead, the old views remain, and we are blind. However, Nicolescu holds out for the “hope of self-birth” and a “visionary, transpersonal, and planetary consciousness, which could be nourished by the miraculous growth of knowledge” (p.2). His hope is expressed in this book.

I expected him to immediately elucidate his familiar methodology of transdisciplinarity, with its three axioms (below), first articulated in 1985; instead, they are woven throughout the book and only listed at p. 207, nine pages from the end of the book:

- Axiom one – the existence of Multiple Levels of Reality (ontology), with movement among them mediated by the Hidden Third (the quantum vacuum);
- Axiom two – the Logic of the Included Middle; and,
- Axiom three – knowledge as complexity (epistemology); the Principle of Universal Interdependence.

But then I reminded myself that this is a book, not a short article or conference paper. He has the delicious opportunity and luxury to tell a story. Indeed, we are treated to a rich and enveloping narrative about the underpinnings of thought, science, and philosophy that shaped his approach to transdisciplinarity. This book focuses on the intellectual and philosophical backdrop of his musings about life beyond modernity. It is a personal and poignant insight into his journey toward transdisciplinarity, and I felt privileged and honoured to read it.

In chapters 1-3 (40 pages), we are guided through discussions of shattered cultures, contemporary physics and the Western tradition, and the grandeur and decadence of scientism. This part of the narrative paints a portrait of the harmful legacy of the modern era. As he exposes this, he introduces the ideas of the transcultural, a transreligious attitude and the Sacred, and a quantum vision of the world. This sets us up for chapters 4-9 (73 pages), which cover the emergence of the quantum world (quantum physics) and the quantum revolution. Quantum matters (pun intended) in any conversation with Basarab Nicolescu, because his transdisciplinary scholarship is deeply informed by his work as a quantum physicist. He draws on concepts like discontinuity, nonseparability, the quantum vacuum (which is not empty), the bootstrap principle, complexity thinking, plurality, superstrings (the fourth dimension), nonresistance, reconciliation of contradictions, inclusive logic, the logic of contradictions, and so on. This book elucidates how these quantum concepts have shaped his approach to transdisciplinarity. Non-quantum physicists like myself (who struggle with these ideas, see McGregor, 2011), will welcome this contribution of the book.

Chapters 10 and 11 (25 pages) revert back to the topic of the first three

chapters. Chapter 10 focuses on dualism (a particularly strong bailiwick for Nicolescu) and Chapter 11 turns to reductionism. Again, as he lays out his discussion of the negative import of these two aspects of classical science (he entitled one section “Are we too deeply immersed in the seventeenth century?”), he introduces exciting ‘new science’ ideas, like unity of the world, the included third, the nature of space and time, the experienced third, and the ternary-quaternary debate. Except for the hidden third, these were all new to me! What an intellectual ride. But he manages to keep you with him, as he turns his attention to other topics.

Chapters 12-14 (29 pages) carried me into even more unfamiliar territory, but having read the previous 150 pages, I felt ready for the intellectual and philosophical challenges, and to be honest, opportunities. He broaches ideas like quantum aesthetics, quantum theatre, and the quantum vision of literature and art. I was excited to see this idea in the book because Nicolescu deeply believes that we should focus on spirituality, aesthetics (beauty and art) and the Sacred if we hope to move forward as a species. He thinks a sign of the cosmodern era is the “interaction between the theory of relativity, quantum mechanics [physics] and art (especially surrealism)” (p. 175.

In Chapter 15, he opens our eyes to the *role of imaginary* (thinking without words) in the creation of knowledge and the unity of knowledge. He describes imaginary as revelations without the benefit of logical thinking, evidenced by sudden insights like those experienced in “the very short intermediate period between sleep and waking up” (p. 180). I have personally experienced these *aha* moments, when I have been chewing on something and then everything – everything – just clicks. Witness this book review, when I finally “got it.”

Like bookends, Chapter 16 mirrors Nicolescu’s angst expressed in the Introduction about adhering to the tenets of classical science despite the power of the quantum. As he debunks classical science, he identifies the basic features of cosmodernity, which I gleaned from reading Chapter 16:

- relationships, the interaction, the interconnection of natural phenomena
- the universe of interconnectedness, of nonseparability
- harmony between humans and nature (includes intuition and spirituality)
- the subtle concept of substance/energy/space-time/information (replaces concept of matter)
- the power of discontinuity and global causality (replace continuity and local causality)
- bridge between science and religion
- intersubjectivity and the included third
- a new cosmodern objectivity – the subject, the object, and their interaction
- the cosmodern world is a vast cosmic matrix, where everything is in perpetual movement and energetic restructuring – this is what *unity of the world* means, the movement of energy, not matter.

I think the intellectual contribution of this book is a form of beautiful, poignant,

heart stopping art. It is an intellectual *pièce de résistance*; it is a creation that resists and defies orthodox or common conventions and practices (i.e., modernism), thereby making the whole of the creation unique and special (cosmodernism). Take a deep breath and read it, ideally from beginning to end, but even sampling it will change your life and open intellectual doors.

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